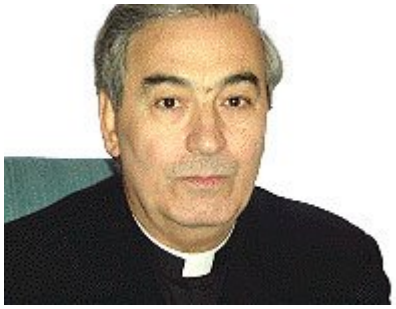
Mesopotamia ܡܣܘܦܘܛܡܝܐ

Issue 3 July 2007

Iraq: Baghdad bishop tells of worsening security crisis for Christians

Posted by Press Release on 30/7/2007, 2:36 pm. **Board Administrator.**
ACN News, Monday, 30th July 2007 – IRAQ (With picture of Bishop Andreas Abouna of Baghdad)

By John Pontifex



BAGHDAD'S Church leaders have joined forces in a desperate bid to protect their people from persecution – according to a bishop who has dared to speak out on the growing crisis engulfing the city's Christians.

Amid signs of worsening oppression against Baghdad's Christian community, Bishop Andeas Abouna said Church leaders from a number of different rites were now rolling out plans to find the faithful homes in safe places away from known hot-spots of extremism.

Speaking during a visit to London, the Auxiliary Bishop of Baghdad said that his Chaldean community had linked up with Syriac Catholic and Armenian hierarchy in a rescue mission for thousands of displaced people.

During the interview, given to Aid to the Church in Need, Bishop Abouna said: "It is not easy for our people – they are in need of everything. The Church is helping in any way it can."

Describing the co-operation between the bishops as unprecedented, Bishop Abouna said the initiative was aimed at providing housing and emergency aid for more than 6,000 Christians forced onto the streets and in grave risk of kidnap or murder in a country with huge security problems.

He explained that the Christians had sought sanctuary in central Baghdad's Al Jadida region having escaped Al Dora, in south west Baghdad, where militant Muslims had put an ultimatum to Christians demanding that they convert to Islam or face eviction from their homes.

Proud of Al Dora's nickname of the 'Vatican of Iraq', the bishop said the people were determined not to lose their religion, retaining strong memories of the region's high concentration of churches and other religious institutions.

Now, according to Bishop Abouna, reports suggest that the persecution in Al Dora is beginning to spread to other parts of the city – with the Karkh region, west of the River Tigris worst affected.

Iraq Church sources claim the number of priests in this area has slumped from 11 to three within just three years.

The emergency support initiative, centring on Baghdad's St George's Church, is on standby for a further influx of displaced Christians, helping them to find temporary accommodation in hostels or with relatives and friends of the Church.

With all seven churches in Dora now closed, and militants refusing to allow Christians back home there, Bishop Abouna said non-Muslims in the Karkh region were under increasing pressure to convert to Islam, as well as mandatory wearing of the veil for women.

The crisis, he said, explained why the exodus of Christians from Baghdad and other parts of Iraq was still high.

He said the mass movement of people meant reliable statistics were no longer available.

Reports show at least half of the 1.2 million Christians in Iraq before the fall of Saddam Hussein have now fled their homes.

With the humanitarian situation growing fast, the Bishop said that in the city clean water was scarce and that electricity was sometimes down to one hour a day.

The bishop described how the high risk of kidnappings and killings meant people were afraid to leave their homes.

But determined to strike a positive note, the bishop went on: "This is not the first time Christians in the ancient land of Mesopotamia have suffered. Despite all the difficulties of the past, Christians somehow remained in our country."

He described making morale-boosting pastoral visits to Mansour, the region of south-west Baghdad where he is based.

"The families are very sad and upset," he said. "They were promised freedom and democracy but nothing like that is happening."

The bishop said: "In spite of the situation, we still hope that peace will come."

He went on to thank ACN for offering key help and support. "What Aid to the Church in Need has given us is very important. We are so grateful."

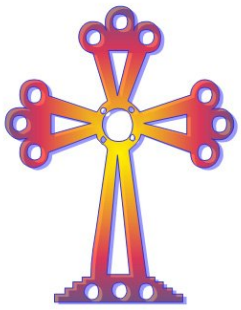
ACN last year provided over $200,000. for the Church in Iraq, much of it emergency aid in response to urgent appeals from the bishops.

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

THE TRAGEDY OF IRAQ'S CHRISTIANS (part 1)

Dr. Joseph SEFERTA

The Christians in Iraq today are undergoing one of the most difficult periods of persecution in their long history, for they are being systematically harassed, kidnapped and killed on a daily basis. Their numbers have dwindled from over a million, or 5% of the population, at the time of Saddam Hussein to barely 2% now. Although their plight is reported frequently by the Catholic/Christian press, there is hardly any mention of it by the secular media.



The Cross of the Church of the East

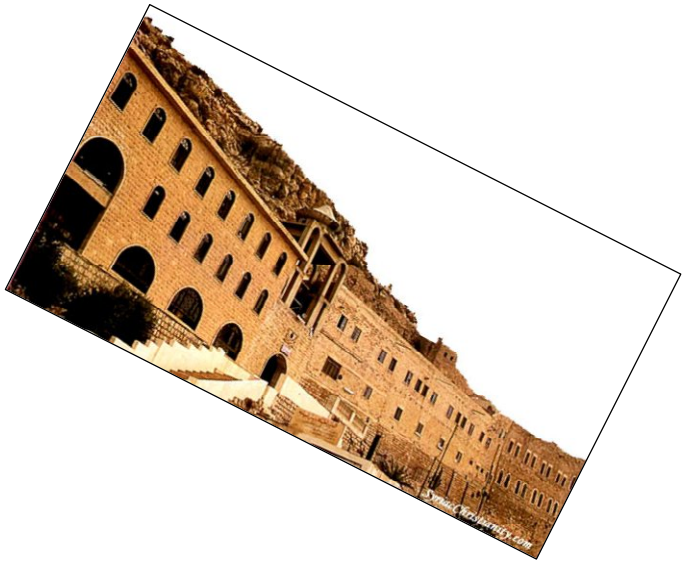
Iraqi Christians may not be considered worth mentioning by the secular press, but they are among the most ancient Christian communities in the Middle East. The Church historian Eusebius (d. 340), among others, states that St. Thomas the Apostle preached the Gospel throughout Mesopotamia (Iraq), Persia (Iran) and India. In fact, India's Christians who live around Goa and the Malabar Coast are still nicknamed "the St. Thomas Christians" today.

The church in Iraq took shape by the end of the 2nd century and became known as "The Church of the East", with a patriarch residing in Seleucia- Ctesiphon near modern-day Baghdad. For several centuries, the Christians of Mesopotamia were persecuted by their Persian rulers because they refused to adopt the Zoroastrian religion, and many of them, including Patriarch Simon Bar-Sabba'I, were martyred under King Shappur II. Nevertheless, these Christians (my ancestors) kept their faith and, on the eve of the Arab Islamic conquests in the 7th c. A.D., the Christian religion was widespread throughout Iraq.

Seleucia- Ctesiphon near Baghdad

Under Islam, Christians and Jews were spared death on account of their being "the people of the book", but they had to pay a hefty religious tax called "jizya", while the pagans had to either convert to Islam or die. Although tolerated, Christians in every Muslim-majority country have always been regarded as second-class citizens because they do not belong to the "umma" or the community of Islam.

For many centuries under Islamic rule, Christians went through intermit-tent periods of persecution, depending on who the rulers were. However, the Church still flourished in various ways: developing beautiful liturgies and monastic traditions, as well as sending out missionaries, as far as Cyprus to the East and China to the west.



Der Mar Matta, Mosul 7th century

This happened after the Mesopotamian church adopted the Nestorian heresy in the 5th century and hence became known as "The Nestorian Church". Nestorius was the Patriarch of Constantinople who described Christ as if he had two personalities, one in heaven and the other on earth. He was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. and was later banished to Egypt.

In the middle Ages, Christian scholars in Mesopotamia and Syria helped build the foundation for Arab philosophy and science by translating the classical works of Plato, Aristotle and other ancient Greek thinkers into Syriac and Arabic. Syriac (also known as Aramaic or Chaldean) is the very language spoken by Jesus

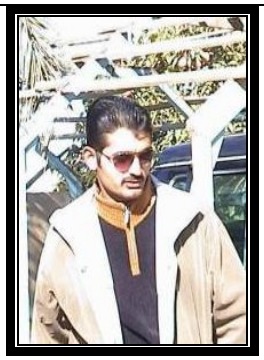
created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

himself, which we still speak and use extensively in our liturgies.

An Eastern Church South of Iraq (6th century)

Various dynasties, including that of the fearsome Mongols ruled Iraq, the Middle East and North Africa. Then, in 1453, Constantinople, the great capital of Byzantine or Eastern Christianity, fell to the Ottoman Turks who changed its name to Istanbul. They ruled for about 400 years until their defeat in World War One, after which their rule was confined to modern-day Turkey which was founded by Kamal Attaturk.
In the late 19th century and early 20th century, more than a million Armenians were massacred by Turkish and Kurdish forces simply on account of their Christian religion. Other Christians were also caught up in these atrocities and were martyred for their faith. After WW1, Iraq became a monarchy and then a republic, undergoing a number of bloody coups, until Saddam Hussein took over in 1969.

The New Iraqi Christian Martyrs (part 2)


Haitham Abod was shot dead in Beaji 200Km north of Baghdad in 15/3/2007

Younan Gareb from Qarawella Dahuk, was shot dead on the road between Tikrit and Baghdad in 27/10/2005

Samir Sabah Mekha, was shot dead in Kurkok 12/4/2007

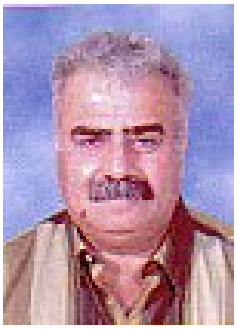
Thamir Najib Azooz, was shot dead in 3/8/07

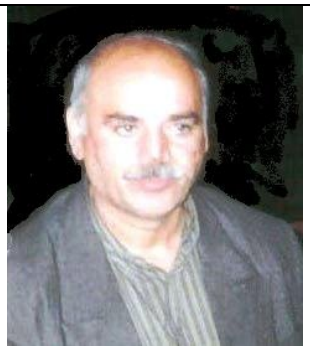
Sami Zeto, was shot dead in Kirkuk in 19/3/07

Fr. Ragheed Ganni, was shot dead in Mosul in 3/6/07

Amera Abdulmaseh, was shot dead in Samaraa in 11/7/07

Ayad Luke Lazar
Was shot dead in Dora in 1/2006 Baghdad


Hikmat Farag Yousif, was shot dead in Bahdad in 7/5/07


Khairy Jarjes, was shot dead in 1/2007

Youkhana Yako Alderani
Was shot dead in 1/1/2006

Two brothers were shod dead in the same day in 14/10/2006

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

Post-Mesopotamian History
(Pre-Christian Era) (3)

By Farid Oufi

Gilgamish 2500BC

The seven day week was an innovation of Ur's Chaldeans. It was conceived of a seven branched Tree of Life and of seven heavens that were passed to Babylon and symbolized there in seven-tiered Ziggurats, or hanging gardens. Sumeria's Gilgamesh epic described the rite of passage through which Eukidu the ape-man became human. It was the World's first epic found on tablets among the ruins of Nineveh and contains also an account of a great flood that has close parallels with the Biblical story of Noah. In spite of all that, Ur's seventh day was not holy. On the contrary, it represented danger and darkness. It was risky to do anything at such a time. So it became a day of rest. Ever since Abraham set himself westward from Ur, Mesopotamian influences had helped to form Hebrew tradition. The Jews got the story of the flood from Sumeria. They got the seven-day-week idea early enough to use it in the account of the Creation given in Genesis. But there may have been some garbling in the transmission[i].

The last Assyrian dynasty in the north of Mesopotamia could not hold out against the Persian invaders and in 610 BC it fell. But the Babylonian-Chaldean dynasty managed to resist for another fifty years or so. Nebuchadnezzer II, the Chaldean king of Babylon died in 562 BC and was succeeded by his son Evil-Merodach but he was deposed and killed by conspirators. Jehoiakim, the king of Judah who had been imprisoned in Babylon for 36 years, was released. Babylonia's king, Nabonidus, acceded to the throne but was defeated in 539 BC by Cyrus the Great, emperor of Persia. Cyrus entered the city of Babylon on 20 October 539 BC amid popular rejoicing.

The animistic Mesopotamia was a difficult environment for a new religion to penetrate as patience; calm and introspection were the keys to faith in one god. Tolerance of slow changes of mind and practice was crucial to its introduction and spread out[ii]. The entire social structure was attached to religious belief based on obedience which was simply the product of blind fear but corresponded to a certain social coherence or an awareness of the obligations of collective living, thus making new religious ideas even harder to get through the minds and the hearts of people, telling them they could speak to God on earth rather than from the top of the fabled Tower of Babyl which signified a belief that the sky was a huge dome where God was, right up in the heavens with the stars. Mountains touch the skies and they touch heaven. Mountains were considered to be the point at which heaven and earth met. So when someone wanted to go and talk to God, he or she would climb the highest mountain and stand at the top. Was the Tower of Babyl built for that purpose? No evidence is known to have emerged to make that assumption true; but according to biblical account in the Book of Genesis, the Babylonians tried to rebel against God by building a tower to reach the heavens. Their plan was frustrated by God causing linguistic confusion among its builders. The many languages of the world were accounted for in this way[iii].

(To be continued)

The Church of the East

Dr Suha Rassam

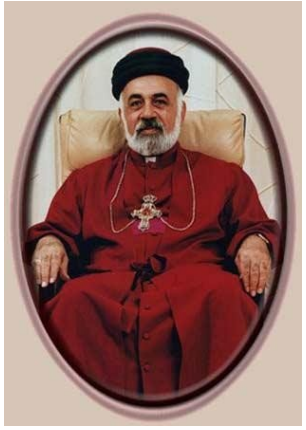
The Church of the East was organized in Iraq after the deportation of its Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimon XXI in 1933 by Metropolitan Mar Yosip Khannanisho. In 1963 he transferred his see to Baghdad and exercised his office as patriarchal vicar over the dioceses of the Middle East. Additic then consecrated for Arbil, Mosul and Syria.

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

Mar Eshai Shimon joined his community in Chicago in the USA, after his efforts to secure an independent homeland had failed. From there, he started to reorganize the Church of the East in the United States of America and other regions of the diaspora. He could not visit his community in Iraq until 1970, when he was recognized by the Iraqi government as the religious head of his church.

Mar Eshai Shimon

The Church of the East was split in 1964, when Mar Eshai Shimon issued a decree in which he announced reforms to the liturgy, shortening the period of Lent and using the Gregorian calendar instead of the Julian calendar. Opposition to these changes came from Baghdad: it led to fracture of the church and the emergence of an independent patriarchate. The opposition party, led by a priest, Ishaq Nwiya, appealed to Mar Thomas Darmo, Metropolitan of India, who travelled to Iraq in 1968 and consecrated three bishops for Iraq; he himself was acknowledged patriarch for the new community. However, he died one year after his consecration and no patriarch was consecrated until 1972,


Mar Addai II Giwargis

since there were attempts at reconciliation with the community of Mar Shimon. When these attempts failed, the community in Iraq chose Mar Addai II Giwargis as patriarch in 1972. He was consecrated as patriarch of the new community, which came to be known as 'The Ancient Church of the East', and has been the head of this church until the present time.

The community that followed the new reforms changed its name to the 'Assyrian Church of the East'. Its patriarch, Mar Eshai Shimon, resigned his office in 1972 and married in 1973. Following the death of Mar Shimon, who was assassinated by a disgruntled relative in 1975, the bishops of this church met in a synod, decided to abolish the hereditary succession of the patriarchate, and introduced the canonical election of the patriarch. They met in October 1976 in London and elected Mar Dinkha IV Khnanaya as patriarch, and successor of the seat of Seleucia–Ctesiphon. Initially he had his seat in Tehran, until after the onset of the Iraqi–Iranian war in 1980, when he transferred it to Chicago; he has been the head of this church until the present time.

The number of the faithful at the beginning of the twenty-first century belonging to the Assyrian Church of the East under Mar Dinkha was estimated to be around 385,000, and the number belonging to the Ancient Church of the East under Mar Addai to be 50–70,000.

Presently, the Assyrian Church of the East has twelve dioceses: three in the USA, including the patriarchal diocese whose centre is in Chicago; two in Iraq, including the metropolitanate in Baghdad; and one in each of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, Europe, Iran, Hassaka, Lebanon, Syria, and India (the last two are meropolitanates).

The Ancient Church of the East has two metropolitans in Iraq (Mosul and Kirkuk) and three bishops, one in each of Syria, Iraq and the USA.

Functioning churches for the Assyrian Church of the East include four in Baghdad, three in Duhok, five in Arbil and surrounding villages, four in Barwari, and one for each of

Mosul, Basra, Kirkuk, Sarsank, Kanibalaf, Dere, rekan, and Ramadi.

Functioning churches for the Ancient Church of the East include two in Baghdad, and one for each of Mosul, Basra, Duhok, Kirkuk, Telkaif, Sharafyya, Karanjok, Dashkotan and Hezani.

Ecumenical dialogue

Since 1948, the Church of the East has been a member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and has participated in multilateral dialogue with Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental, Anglican, Reformed and Lutheran Churches. However admission to the Middle Eastern Council of Churches (MECC) has been rep

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

the Coptic Orthodox Church. In addition, both branches of the Church of the East have been active participants in the Syriac dialogue at the Pro Oriente foundation in Vienna since the middle of the 1980s.

Mar Dinkha with the Pope John Paul II

Dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church has been specially fruitful and achieved positive results. Mar Dinkha had met Pope John Paul II on his inauguration in 1978 and the two seem to have got on fairly well. In 1984 Mar Dinkha made an official visit to Rome together with the two other leaders of his Church, in order to inaugurate a process of theological dialogue. Lengthy discussions over ten years led to the historical common Christological Declaration on 11 November 1994. Further dialogue on sacramental theology followed from October 1995 and in October 2001 the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity published guidelines for admission to the Eucharist between the two churches.

On the basis of the common Christological declaration between Mar Dinkha IV and John Paul II, the Church of the East began to dialogue with the Chaldean Church. In 1996 the patriarchs of the two corresponding churches inaugurated an official process of co-operation between the two churches on pastoral and other practical levels.

Attempts to bring the two sister churches of the Church of the East together have also been on the way. Since 1984 the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, Mar Dinkha, and the patriarch of the Ancient Church of the East, Mar Addai, have agreed on a reunion. In a synod of the Assyrian Church of the East convened in 1999, Mar Dinkha recognized all previous ordinations of the Ancient Church of the East from reader to patriarch.

SAINTS FROM MESOPOTAMIA

By: Wisam Talal

St Kirdagh

Sources tell us that this martyr is an ancestor of the Assyrian King Nimrod (Genesis 10:8-10). As his father, he had a handsome appearance. He was fit, strong in body, skilful in fighting and was very zealous for his pagan religion.

At the age of 25, due to his fame and his skill in archery, he was chosen to be the King's hunting companion. He was also placed as a minister over Ashur and *Merziban*.

Christians were afraid of him because he was very zealous for his Persian pagan religion. They prayed to God to lessen his religious passion so that he may not persecute them.

He started building a temple, fortress, and a palace in Arbil. One night he dreamed of St Sirkes the servant of Christ. The Saint said to him "Know that you will surely die as a martyr for Christ in front of this fortress". Narrating the dream to his mother, she warned him not to cause any trouble to Christians.

Kirdagh came to know the love of Christ through the Blessed *Abed Easho*. After he became a Christian, he was stoned to death on the last Friday of the Summer weeks A.D. 308. He has a shrine and a monastery named after him near *al - Qosh*.

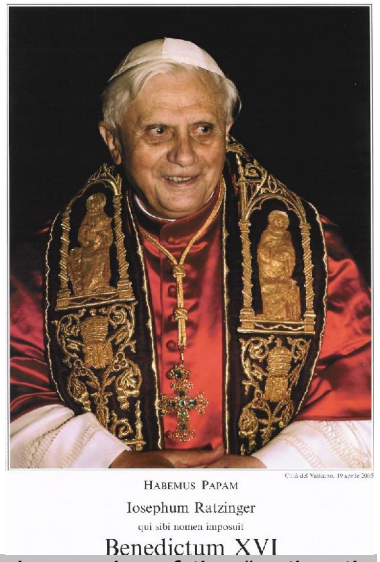
Al-Qosh, Christian sity 40km north of Mosul

Pope: martyrdom of Christians in the Middle East, where peace is offended

Benedict XVI renews his condolences for the murder in Iraq of Father Ragheed Ganni and his three sub deacons and remembers those families forced to flee under threats of death and violence. An appeal to political leaders to free peace from discrimination, be it religious, cultural historic

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

Vatican City (AsiaNews) – **T**he "weakness of peace", longed for in the Middle East, is being further eroded by new and old injustices and by the "deadly disease" of discrimination, which gives way to violence, a violence that is targeting the regions Christians particularly those in Iraq. Remembering Fr. Ragheed Ganni and his three sub deacons murdered June 3 last in Mosul, Benedict XVI



today spoke of the "authentic martyrdom in the name of Jesus Christ" of Iraq's Christians and assured the prayers and action of the Holy See and of all of the Church for the Holy Land, Iraq and Lebanon.

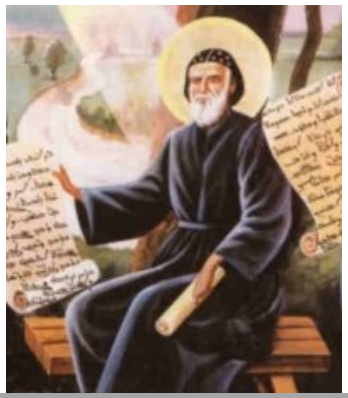
The Pope returned to express his "sorrow and concern for the delicate situation of vast areas of the Middle East" receiving members of the Reunion for the Aid to Oriental Churches (Roaco). The Pope also spoke of the tragic reality of Iraq with the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East Mar Dinkha IV who he also received today.

Peace, so longed for - he said – is unfortunately still being offended. It is offended in the hearts of the individual, which compromises interpersonal and inter community relations. The weakness of peace is being further undermined by old and new injustices. Thus it is quashed, leaving space to violence, which often degenerates into war more or less openly declared, which constitutes, as we see in these days, a grave international problem".

For peace the Pope invited Christians and the faithful of other religions to "knock on the door to God's heart". "I am knocking – he continued – on the door to the hearts of all of those who have specific responsibility so that they adhere to the very serious duty of guaranteeing peace for all, without distinction, freeing them from the deadly disease of discrimination, be it religious, cultural, historic or geographic".

Assuring the spiritual closeness of Catholics to their suffering brothers, Benedict XVI turned to the Chaldean Catholic Emanuel Delly to renew "the Pope's condolences for the barbarous murder of an innocent priest and his three sub deacons which took place at the end of Sunday mass on June 3 last in Iraq. The entire Church accompanies all of its sons and daughters with affection and admiration and it supports them in this the hour of an authentic martyrdom for the name of Jesus Christ".

Earlier he had told Patriarch Mar Dinkha "Christian families and communities are feeling increasing pressure from insecurity, aggression and a sense of abandonment. Many of them see no other possibility than to leave the country and to seek a new future abroad. These difficulties are a source of great concern to me, and I wish to express my solidarity with the pastors and the faithful of the Christian communities who remain there, often at the price of heroic sacrifices".



Saint Ephrem

Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Saint John 6,1-15.

Copyright © Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, USCCB

Saint Ephrem (around 306 – 373), Deacon in Syria, Doctor of the Church, Diatesseron, 12, 4-5

"They gathered twelve baskets full of pieces left over"

In the twinkling of an eye the Lord multiplied a little bread. What human beings do in ten months of wo

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image

do in an instant… Nevertheless, he didn't measure this miracle by its power, but according to the hunger of those who were there. If the miracle had been measured by its power, it would be impossible to evaluate it; measured according to the hunger of those thousands of people, the miracle went beyond the twelve baskets. Among artisans, their power is inferior to the customers' desire; they cannot do everything that is asked of them. Contrary to them, what God accomplishes goes beyond all desire …

When they had been satiated like the Israelites in past times through the prayer of Moses, they cried out: "This is undoubtedly the Prophet who is to come into the world." They were referring to the words of Moses: "A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you." Not just any prophet, but "a prophet like me" (Deut 18:15), who will satiate you with bread in the desert. Like me, he walked on the sea, he appeared in the luminous cloud (Mt 17:5), he freed his people. He handed Mary over to John just like Moses handed over his flock to Joshua… But the bread of Moses was not perfect; it was only given to the Israelites. Because he wanted to show that his gift is superior to that of Moses, and the call to the nations still more perfect, our Lord said: "If anyone eats this bread he shall live forever," for the bread from God "has come down from heaven" and is given to the whole world (Jn 6:51).

Patriarch and Bishops ordinations joy

Two new Catholic Priests and two deacons have been ordained in Iraq and Rome for two dioceses. Patriach Amanual Dally has ordained one priest (Remon Hamid) and one deacon (Yousif Khalid) to Diocese of Baghdad July 21; Deacon Robert has been ordained in Rome to serve in Baghdad also. Bishop Faraj Raho has ordained Ephram Gilyana to Diocese of Mosul in July 7. They have studied priesthood at Babylon College in Baghdad (recently in Arbil north of Iraq).

Bishops expressed their delighted, about these religious events, and its significant effect, at the time, where brutality continues against Christians in Baghdad and Mosul.

Iraqi Christian's children celebrating First Communion

Despite the cancellation of most religious ceremonies in the churches of Baghdad since 2003, hundreds of Iraqi Christians children risked their lives last Sundays to receive their first Communion. The Chaldean Patriarch, said:" half of the churches in Baghdad are closed, but Christians still decided to go ahead."

Mesopotamia: Eastern Iraqi Christians Newspaper, Editor: Fr. Habib JAJOU
Email: Fr_habib@yahoo.com Tel: 02089976370 www.chaldean.org.uk
Publisher: Chaldean Catholic Mission, 38Cavendish Ave. Ealing, London W13 0JQ.
In order to cover production costs we recommend a supporting subscription.
Opinions expressed in the articles are those of the authors, not necessarily of the Church as such.

[i] The Economist of 22 December 2001 – p 112
[ii] Geoff Simons, "Iraq from Sumar to Saddam" – p 99
[iii] The Oxford Encyclopedia

created using BCL easyPDF Printer Driver
Click here to purchase a license to remove this image